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ABSTRACT

Rapidly advancing communications technology has moved the concept of speech far beyond that imagined by the authors of the First Amendment. Similarly, the power of the government to license, tax, regulate, and investigate has also increased enormously. Communications media have come to dominate the consciousness of Americans, and particularly news journalist have come to play a major role in the shaping of public opinion. For these reasons, the time has come for a reevaluation of the news media in order to: (1) make citizens aware of news gathering procedures, (2) test the validity of those procedures, and (3) examine whether the role assumed by American journalists is an appropriate one. (EMH)

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ASPEN INSTITUTE FOR HUMANISTIC STUDIES

COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIETY: TOWARD A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

by

Douglass Cater

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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PREFACE

The following is a thoughtful and provocative statement by Douglass Cater, Director of the Aspen Program in Communications and Society, which is sponsored jointly by the Aspen Institute and the Academy for Educational Development.

In less than a year, under Mr. Cater's direction, the Aspen Program in Communications and Society has identified certain deep and enduring issues in this field and has helped to create a new community of leaders throughout society who are concerned with both the challenges and problems which communications provide society. Specific and useful work is under way in the fields of public television; the humanistic use of the cable; politics, government and the media; and the social impact of television.

Efforts are now under way to strengthen the relationship between the Program in Communications and Society and the other four areas in which the Aspen Institute is conducting workshops, seminars, conferences and task forces. Designed to channel reflective thought into recommendations of constructive actions, the workshop program, in addition to communications issues, focuses on social and humanistic issues in relation to environment and the quality of life; basic educational reform; science, technology and humanism; and law, justice and the individual. A sixth action area, relating to international concerns, is presently under consideration.

From the Communications and Society Program will come a number of books as well as legislative testimony, short monographs, and articles. Mr. Cater's essay is part of a forthcoming Aspen Notebook on Government and the Media.

J. E. Slater
President
Aspen Institute

January, 1973

COMMUNICATIONS AND SOCIETY: TOWARD A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

Aspen - January, 1973

The First Amendment set up a separation zealously guarded over nearly two centuries, between government and the press. There is need to examine the present condition of that separation. While our conventional wisdom holds to the proposition that the media should be free and independent from government, it fails to account for the growth of entangling relationships beyond the purview of the First Amendment.

Government and the media engage in daily and intimate intercourse, regularly accusing each other of mortal offenses. Conflict between the official right to secrecy and the press's right to publish is waged in a no-man's land; Congress shies away from legislative interpretation and Court rulings leave vast areas of uncertainty. The government official does not hesitate to disclose classified information when it promotes his purposes. Reporters exploit biased confidences frequently without attempting to search out the fuller facts. This temptation to manipulate the communication process saddeningly lacks self-correctives. It leads to increasingly harsh and dogmatic confrontations between government and the media. Cumulatively, it contributes to a growing crisis of public understanding which affects the credibility of both.

Even greater public confusion arises over issues of media regulation. Once upon a time, government exercised little regulatory power beyond its prerogative to allocate official advertisements among competitive publishers. Today, government power goes wide and deep. The licensing authority of the Federal Communications Commission creates ambiguity about First Amendment rights of the broadcaster. The Newspaper Preservation Act grants special privilege -- and vulnerability -- for the publisher. Postal rate regulation can mean life or death for periodicals. Public Broadcasting's future is being shaped by annual appropriation after the most searching review by the White House and Congress. Franchising and rule making are setting the fundamentals for satellite and cable development in America. The new technologies open the prospect of greatly expanded diversity in our communications system. But here, too, government must determine the policy by which diversity is achieved.

We enter the era of "television of abundance" at a time of growing public concern over television's impact on social behavior. Congressional leaders show an inclination to hold network heads responsible for pollution of the air waves. But will government pressure against certain types of broadcast programming -- cigarette advertisements, televised violence,

X-rated pornography -- be extended to the multiple channels of the cable? Who will be held accountable? And to whom? How will government deal with the question of regulating newsprint when it is delivered by facsimile over the TV set?

Organized publics are keenly aware that our nation's media constitute a de facto fourth branch of government. Through communication, there is power. This has brought growing citizen demands for the right to communicate. Those range from petitions by counter-advertisers to lawsuits by the opposition party seeking network time to respond to the President. Recent court and regulatory commission decisions have tended to expand First Amendment doctrine by setting off the citizen's against the broadcaster's rights, and raising perplexing issues of how to arbitrate "access" and "fairness."

Amid the disputations between media and government there is danger of ignoring the common obligation they share -- to provide "a picture of reality on which men can act." This phrase was of Walter Lippmann's coinage but concern about the role of communications in society goes back at least as far as Plato. In The Republic Plato related the parable of the underground cave where human beings have been chained since childhood, positioned so they see only the shadows projected against the cave's inner wall. Plato concluded, "And if they were able to talk with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?"

We might find it challenging to attempt to explain to Plato how our Republic keeps its citizenry informed. We would say first off that news is free -- or nearly free -- for the citizen. How then is it paid for, he might ask? We would reply that news is supported by our merchants who have products to sell. By their advertisements, they subsidize our print news and totally support our broadcast news. Doesn't this, asks Plato, distort the communications? Not so serious distortion as letting the government pay and control, we would reply. But we would be obliged to confess that merchandizing does determine the amount of news the citizen receives. Newspaper column inches rise and fall in proximate ratio to advertising content. Television's public affairs programs must compete for time with the higher-earning fictional dramas. For the newsweeklies the size of world wide staffs depends not so much on what is happening as how Madison Avenue ad agencies allocate their accounts. No one can be certain whether the coming competition of the cable for the advertising dollar will increase or diminish the total revenues and

and resources devoted to projecting the image on the cave's wall.

Is each citizen equally informed, Plato might inquire? Not really, we must answer. If the citizen lives in certain metropolitan communities -- New York, Washington, Los Angeles -- his newspapers bulge with the latest national and international events. In other communities -- Denver, San Francisco, Tucson -- he must content himself with a thin diet of more than local happenings. His broadcast fodder similarly varies depending on where he lives and who owns his community's media.

Plato might consider this to be a most peculiar arrangement for a Republic where public opinion is the ultimate ruler. Natural law does not decree that what the citizen needs to know should be in continuing balance with what the merchant needs to sell. But can anyone devise a better alternative? Lacking one, we regularly insist that our media are "affected with the public interest." We demand that they be governed by more than profit motive. We exhort them to do a better job.

But enough of Plato and on to Agnew. In his critique of the media, the Vice President essentially made two points: One, they fail to communicate the picture of reality that accords with the picture he holds. Two, the picture communicated by the media is controlled by a small mysterious group known as "they." Mr. Agnew didn't get very specific about who "they" are; but "they" are to blame for our communication failures. Now the interesting thing about Agnew's analysis is that Stokely Carmichael and Jerry Rubin and other leaders of the radical left would agree with both points. So would George Wallace. The devil theory of the mass media rallies a diverse band of brothers.

More disturbing to serious critics is that Agnew stirred a response among a much wider public than the extremists on the right and the left. He apparently touched a sensitive nerve. We need to study this phenomenon. It is not enough to respond in the fashion of the bumper sticker I once saw in Los Angeles: "Will the silent majority please shut up."

Do the communications media present an adequate picture of reality to the American public? One media critic, who is widely quoted but little read and even less understood, suggests that this is not a proper question. The question ought to be turned around, according to Marshall McLuhan. He argues that the media are not reflecting but shaping society. In an interview carried in Playboy, which is the clearest explication of his theories that I have come across, McLuhan states:

> All media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment.... But most people, from truck drivers to literary Brahmins, are still blissfully unaware of what the media do to them; unaware that because of their pervasive effects on man, it is the medium itself that is the message, not the content, and unaware that the medium is also the massage -- that, all puns aside, it literally works over and saturates and molds and transforms every sense ratio. The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.

McLuhan is a controversial and frequently confusing critic. I am not certain that he himself fully understands the full implications of his various insights. But he was not the first to contemplate the shaping role of the media. E. B. White, that sensitive observer of mankind, wrote a short essay in the New Yorker back in 1938 after he had witnessed a demonstration of television. He concluded, "I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television -- of that I am quite sure." White went on to explain:

> Television will enormously enlarge the eye's range, and, like radio, will advertise the Elsewhere. Together with the tabs, the movies, it will insist that we forget the primary and the near in favor of the secondary and the remote. More hours in every twenty-four will be spent digesting ideas, sounds, images -- distant and concocted. In sufficient accumulation, radio sounds and television sounds may become more familiar to us than their originals. A door closing, heard over the air; a face contorted, seen in a panel of light -- these will emerge as the real and the true; and when we bang the door of our own cell or look into another's face the impression will be of mere artifice.

This interplay of image and reality long fascinated me as a reporter

in Washington. For I observed that the image of government, projected by the media, was being accepted as the reality not only by the people but by those involved in government. In 1958, I wrote in my book, The Fourth Branch of Government, that the news of government

> has been known to assume a generative spirit of its own -- in turn recreating the people and policies being publicized even as the Hollywood starlet is remade to fit the public stereotype. The reporter in Washington has witnessed on numerous occasions the phenomenon described by the psychologist when the mask of the man takes possession of the true self. More than witness, he has helped to shape the mask which transforms the public figure.

After serving four and a half years inside the White House, I can only say "amen" to this analysis. Communication media have a vast power to shape government -- its policies and its leaders. This is not a strictly editorial power. It is the power to select -- out of the tens of thousands of words spoken in Washington each day and the tens of dozens of events -- which words and events are projected for mankind to see. Equally powerful is the media's capacity to ignore. Those words and events which fail to get projected might as well not have occurred.

My criticism of the media is that they don't take themselves and their role seriously enough. A number of my colleagues in the press were offended by the title of my book assigning the communicators to a fourth branch of government. They felt contaminated by the phrase. They refuse to admit that those who are involved in the communications of a democracy play a major role in its governance.

The media project the shadows by which American society judges itself -- whether we are pretty or ugly, healthy or sick. In the age of television, we are all more aware that each of us lives in a cubbyhold of direct experience. We all spend more and more of our lives, in E. B. White's phrase, viewing the secondary and the remote, digesting ideas, sounds, images -- distant and concocted. How can any one of us judge whether the images we see are an adequate picture?

We are more image-conscious than our forefathers. Marshall McLuhan argues that we need to be conscious not only of images, but

how the images are made and their impact on us. He writes:

> In the past, the effects of media were experienced more gradually, allowing the individual and society to absorb and cushion their impact to some degree. Today, in the electronic age of instantaneous communication, I believe that our survival, and at the very least our comfort and happiness, is predicated on understanding the nature of our new environment, because unlike previous environmental changes, the electric media constitute a total and near-instantaneous transformation of culture, values, and attitudes. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss which can be ameliorated only through a conscious awareness of its dynamics.

These are abstract words but they may help explain some of the hostility toward the media which has been displayed by the silent and the not-so-silent majority. We don't know for sure what the media are doing to us but we are damned uncomfortable about it.

At the risk of being charged with bias, I would like to present two examples of faulty communication for which the media at least partly share the blame:

As the decade of the 1950's came to a close, the dominant image of America held by most Americans was of a quiet society afflicted with faint fears of being stagnant. Our great concern was to achieve a higher economic growth rate. J. K. Galbraith, a pace setter among idea men, had in 1958 published his book The Affluent Society. He devoted only a limited amount of attention to the poverty in our midst and pretty well confined even that, as Michael Harrington later pointed out, to "insular" rather than "endemic" poverty. John F. Kennedy found a convincing campaign theme in pledging to get America moving again, But when he talked of millions of people going to bed hungry at night, even close supporters thought he was laying it on a bit thick.

The reality of that period was quite different. The American economy may have been stagnant but American society was in tremendous ferment. During that decade alone, there was a migration of over 8 million Americans into the metropolitan areas. Since the start of World War II, nearly two and a quarter million blacks left the South and crowded into the northern cities. Urban America was feeling the tremendous strain on its facilities -- schools, hospitals and clinics,

welfare. There was a rapidly growing crisis in the finance and governance of the cities. Prosperous Americans were fleeing to the suburbs.

And that crisis was not being adequately communicated. I was a reporter during that decade and share the blame. To refresh my memory, I dispatched a researcher to the Library of Congress to review the record. My conclusion is that the media did not serve as an early warning system for the crisis. Poverty, as Harrington wrote in 1962, was "invisible." It was not being heard, not being communicated.

Let us turn to my second example. As the decade of the 1960's drew to a close, there were some rather startling statistical changes in America. The economy had achieved an unparalleled period of rapid growth. The increase in gross national product during the first eight years of that decade, measured in constant dollars, was greater than the entire GNP of 1938. To put it succinctly, in less than a decade, a second economy had been built as large as the national economy prior to World War II. At the same time, there was unprecedented spending by federal, state, and local governments on poverty-related programs. More families were moving out of poverty and at a faster rate than at any time in our nation's history.

Yet, if we looked at the projected images of our communication system, we saw unmitigated misery. There was widespread public concern that we had become a sick society. Spokesmen, from George Wallace on the right to the extremists of the left and a good many in between, found agreement in the slogan: "We never had it so bad." The picture we were seeing of ourselves led to growing despondency among many citizens over whether our society, as presently organized, can cure its ills.

I suggest that this, too, represents a failure of communication. It is, paradoxically, an opposite failure from my first example. During the late fifties, our communication media failed to serve us as an adequate early warning system for troubles already on the horizon. During the late sixties, the media failed to discriminate adequately among the troubles in our midst. Like a stuck alarm in a crowded theater, the jangling of the media threatened to stimulate either public panic or public apathy or both.

These are blanket and highly subjective indictments, I realize. They provoke impatient reactions from reporters and editors. So why

blame the media for all the sins of society? What about the experts in and out of the universities? What about politicians who claim to represent the people? Haven't they contributed to the faulty picture of American society? The answer is that they certainly have. But our concern here is the media.

A more serious objection is that the mere statement of these inadequacies puts impossible demands on our communications media. Am I, to use Walter Lippmann's phrase, asking the reporter to serve as "the umpire in the unscored baseball game?" A half century ago, in his classic book Public Opinion, Walter Lippmann raised the question whether "news" -- the product of the media -- could ever be made to serve as the vehicle for communicating the "truth" about government or society. He reached a pessimistic conclusion. "If we assume... that news and truth are two words for the same thing, we shall, I believe, arrive nowhere," he wrote. The function of news, Lippmann pointed out, is "to signalize an event" whereas the function of truth is "to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act." Lippmann thus dismissed the communications media as the means to present an adequate picture of American society to the public. Instead, he advocated the creation of new institutions of "organized intelligence" which would serve as the purveyors of truth.

Looking at the situation 50 years later, I am inclined to doubt that the roles of news and truth can be that neatly divided. I do not believe that the leaders of the communications media wish to abdicate the task of bringing to light the hidden facts, setting them into relation with each other, and making a picture of reality on which men can act. That has been the main thrust of the best investigatory journalism.

There have been some noteworthy new organizations of intelligence since Lippmann wrote his book. The Council of Economic Advisers, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Bureau of the Census supply vital and impartial statistics which have vastly improved the reporting on the nation's economy. Economic communications are no longer like umpiring an unscored baseball game. Similarly, a private institution such as Congressional Quarterly has provided better yardsticks for measuring and communicating an adequate picture of the legislative branch. Numerous other enterprises -- the Drug Abuse Council, the Urban Institute, the Fair Campaign Practices Committee, etc. -- have sprung up to provide organized intelligence on complicated problems of

American society. They have helped to create a more adequate picture. Many of them have been subsidized by foundations. I sometimes wonder what would be the condition of our communications if the media were not aided by this particular form of philanthropy.

But I do not believe it is the job of government or philanthropy to take over completely the organizing of intelligence. Our communications media are not paupers. They can afford to do a larger share of the digging and the fitting together and the reporting in depth. I learned in my journalist days that the really important reporting is expensive in time and money. It is easier and much cheaper to play follow-the-leader journalism -- to read the clipping files, think up a gimmicky new lead and practice armchair reporting. I watched a great deal of that variety while I was in the White House.

I marvel at the maldistribution of reportorial resources. Scores of reporters are dispatched to ride the candidate's campaign plane. Less than a handful give any systematic coverage to the education crisis in America which affects the lives of millions of children. Education and health appear to stand only slightly higher than religion as journalistic beats.

To organize intelligence and present a more adequate picture of reality is going to require initiative by those involved with communications. It is time for them to be more than at best grudging, at worst hostile recipients of other people's ideas about taking up new responsibilities in a new era. I will be impressed when I see leaders from the press and television media, individually or in association, approach the universities and research institutes on better ways to organize intelligence about our society. We know, for example, that economic indicators have only limited value in revealing the social condition. Why aren't the media leading the effort to develop a set of social indicators that will provide reporters with meaningful yardsticks?

We live in an era when all our traditional institutions are under attack. The Establishment is suspect. Old and private arrangements can no longer be easily defended. The credibility gap looms before all who exercise power in our society, not simply the politicians. Universities, foundations, churches -- no institution has been exempt from searching reexamination by those who challenge the way our society works.

There is no reason why the institutions of the communications media

should be exempt. They are crucially affected with the public interest. This does not call for government regulation in the manner of the public utilities. Far from it. But it does mean that there is a right of public review of how well the media are fulfilling their role.

Several ways occur to me for helping close the credibility gap and perhaps even improve media performance:

First, it is time for more public accounting of the problems of the media. How the news is managed has been kept in dark mystery even as the press strives to throw the fierce light of publicity on decision making elsewhere. It would be refreshing, first of all, for the public to know that the collecting, processing, and distributing of news require judgments all along the line. Human judgments. It would be even more helpful to credibility if there were more frank discussions and mutual criticism of human error in the managing of news. For too long the communicators have operated according to Randolph Churchill's dictum that "Dog don't eat dog." When one of them commits folly, everyone else looks the other way.

One cannot expect self-criticism to be too rigorous. But there is no reason why the newspapers can't be sharply critical of television and television of the print media. And there is good reason to encourage more young men to follow the footsteps of A. J. Liebling and Ben Bagdikian as thoughtful critics of the media. Where are their successors?

A heartening prospect is the recent decision of the Twentieth Century Fund to take the lead in sponsoring a national Council on Press Responsibility and Press Freedom. Urged by a distinguished task force, including leading representatives of the media, such a Council can investigate grievances, urge higher news standards, and build better public understanding of the complexity of communications.

A second area of public accounting goes to the structure of communications. It is time for an institution looking at the system as a whole. How is the health of the media? Why are there so many exits and so few entrances to the newspaper business? Must one national magazine after another die without a public accounting for their failure? Should the tax laws allow conglomerates to bid for media properties with different kinds of dollars than individual entrepreneurs? How can we provide new incentives to maintain diversity in media ownership?

All these questions and others are worthy of serious inquiry. We need to know more how government impacts on the media with its ad hoc and random policies. A system's analysis, perhaps including an econometric media model, could in turn contribute to shaping sound public policy.

A non-governmental Institute for Communications Policy would not have a humble assignment. It might start from the bottom up by examining exactly what is the picture that reaches the citizen. Then it could proceed to define areas of organized intelligence which are missing in that picture that reaches the citizen. Then it could proceed to define areas of organized intelligence which are missing in that picture. And, finally, it would come to the question of what role the media might be expected to play -- the existing media and possibly newly created media.

I don't believe we should jump to the conclusion that our existing media represent the last word in communications. There is room for innovation. Yardstick media such as public television should be given a fair and well-financed opportunity to prove their worth. Just as "Sesame Street" has demonstrated marvelous new techniques for stimulating preschoolers, there may be untried ways of reaching adults with a more adequate picture of the world beyond their immediate horizons.

It was my privilege to ride herd for the President on the legislation that created the Public Broadcasting Corporation. I believe it to be one of the more helpful initiatives in the communications field during the past few decades. But I am full of fears for public television. Hand-to-mouth appropriations as a means of financing it could lead to all sorts of hidden pressures that would destroy its integrity.

In making this suggestion for a new institution, I am well aware of the derisive greeting it will receive from many veterans in the communications field. I remember the abuse heaped on the Hutchins Commission nearly a quarter century ago. Reread this many years later, the Hutchins Report does not seem like such a radical document. Its main message was that the press could best maintain its freedom by becoming more accountable. Its most daring proposal was to create an agency, independent of government and of the press, to appraise and report annually upon the press.

The Hutchins Commission listed society's five expectations of the communications media:

1. A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning;

2. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;

3. The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society;

4. The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society;

5. Full access to the day's intelligence.

These are hardly a very startling set of expectations. It would be helpful if a new commission took a look to see whether we have moved closer or farther away from realizing them.

But the fact is that the communications business is often treated by its spokesmen as the last preserve of rugged individualism. Even as media have grown into vase corporate enterprises, its spokesmen keep up the pretense. The First Amendment is treated as an iron-clad bar against probing into the adequacy of communications, even as the publishers pushed through an act of Congress exempting them from the Antitrust Act.

Let me be clear. When I argue that the communications media are affected with the public interest, I am not talking about the official government's interest. They do not belong within Spiro Agnew's interest. Indeed the media should probe more relentlessly into the significant business of government and hold public officials to stricter accounting on issues of public concern. A press with true grit would not docilely accept the decline of the Presidential press conference as a rigorous and regular institution for putting the Chief Executive on the spot. Government leaders must not be relieved of their obligation to help create the picture of reality on which men can act.

More threatening than the frontal confrontation between government and the media is the subtle blackmail which affects the flow of

news without the public's awareness. Within the White House now exists an Office of Telecommunications Policy. A predictable bureaucratic effort to coordinate policymaking, it nonetheless heightens the danger of invisible pressures for caution and conformity by the media managers.

Concern for communications should not be left solely to government or the media. Others have a role to play in setting the goals, defining the problems, and keeping check on shortcomings. Free-standing institutions need to be created to maintain countervailing powers.

For we are dealing with the most critical function that holds a free society together -- how it communicates. And the challenge in a society grown as big and vulnerable as ours is formidable. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that the dinosaur did not go out of existence because he was too big or too clumsy. What really happened was that his communication system did not create an adequate picture of reality on which the dinosaur could act. That story holds a lesson.